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ABSTRACT

Despite a strong concern for ethical and responsible journalism, journalists themselves disagree as to whether their practice is a profession and if it is, which of the many definitions of "profession" describes it. Judged according to the following criteria sometimes used to describe other professions, journalism cannot be classified as a profession: training--successful journalism does not require specialized intellectual training; professional responsibility--reporters and publishers differ radically on this issue; professional organizations--the print and broadcast journalist is not represented directly by any group; professional regulation--this occurs outside the field, rather than from within; professional pride--a lack of pride is reflected in the low economic status and high attrition rate among reporters; and ethical standards--the journalist is monitored from outside the field. Rather than judge the practice of journalism, it seems fairer to evaluate individual journalists as professional or non-professional according to the importance of their work, the integrity involved, and the responsibility and time that are demanded. (HAI)

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ETHICAL IDEALISM:

A LOOK AT JOURNALISTS AND PROFESSIONALISM

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ETHICAL IDEALISM: A LOOK AT JOURNALISTS AND PROFESSIONALISM

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When this century began, Stanley Walker the former city editor of the New York Herald Tribune said the image of the American journalist was:

> . . .identified in the popular mind as a low and irresponsible rake with misshapen and unnatural images in his head, a flask of gin on his hip, scant carfare in his pocket, dandruff on his coat-collar, a leer in his eyes and headed straight for Hell. . . .He might be well educated, but he was frittering away his time. He might have his moments of charm, but he was regarded as essentially a wastrel and, given the opportunity, a Grade-A guttersnipe. His dreams, when genius kissed him, might carry to the stars, but his feet were in the mire of some back alley. [1]

Then, thirty years later, Walker said the journalist seemed, if anything, a shade more scrofulous than before as he wrote:

> Today the reporter is supposed to smash all the furniture in sight when invited to a home. He prefers to climb the chandelier before beginning an interview with the Chairman of United States Steel. He gets his greatest scoops while sleeping off a drunk in some boozy haven in the red light district. He writes best on twelve Scotch highballs. He insults everybody in earshot and is rewarded handsomely for his bad manners. He is happiest and most heroic when he has been thrown down a flight of stairs. He has one wife whom he rarely sees and always mistreats, an ex-wife in Peoria who has never been able to collect alimony, and a honey in Brooklyn Heights who regards him as a misunderstood Zola. Quite a lad.[2]

In this decade, Bagdikian tells us that even noted journalists did not have strong professional ethics, saying:

> The successful editor in early-American journalism was often the one with the most solid reputation for ingenious lies. Some of the early giants of American journalism--James Gordon Bennett, William Randolph Hearst--were gigantic inventors of melodramatic fiction masquerading as news. As late as the 1920's, some of the most prominent journalists--Damon Runyon, H.L Mencken--were praised for the clever stories they invented and printed as though they were factual news.[3]

Some of the glowing historical biographies might challenge these quotes, but it is reasonably safe to assume the American journalist never has been considered to be the most ethical or most professional person in the world. Today, as the glory of Woodward and Bernstein is still with us, there has been much written about journalists and professionalism. Sigma Delta Chi, the national association of American news gathers, recently changed its name to the Society of Professional Journalists. In journalism schools across the country courses in ethics either are being created or revised.

This paper examines ethics and professionalism in American journalism. In a thorough review of the literature available on this subject one is led to suggest that the calling of journalism as a profession might be more idealistic than realistic.

Perhaps the rising education and affluence of the general public has demanded more professionalism from the American journalist. When Adoloph Ochs bought the failing New York Times at the turn of the century, his approach was to eliminate the sensationalism of the competition and to publish a newspaper "with solid news coverage and editorial opinion which would be designed for readers who did not like overemphasis of entertainment and features."[4]

The approach used by Ochs and his longtime managing editor, Carl Van Anda, was instrumental in developing a superb and honest news coverage.

This successful modus operandi was one of the most important factors determining American journalism.[5]

However, even today, despite a strong concern for ethical and responsible journalism, empirical studies indicate that journalists themselves disagree as to whether their practice is a profession.[6]

Pulitzer recognized the problem when he wrote: "We need a class feeling among journalists; one based not upon money, but upon morals, education and character."[7]

Defining a Profession

Whether or not journalism is a "profession" depends entirely upon the rigidity of the definition of this term. In today's modern age of sophistication and specialization many occupations which have not already done so contend for acceptance from society by seeking professional recognition. They do this by emphasizing the services their vocation offers and by building a body of specialized knowledge and techniques with which to administer these services.

Interpretation of this word "profession" often is misunderstood because the term fails explicitly to name or clearly describe a body, or group, which either is identified, or immediately identifiable, by all. Some accept the dictionary definition, "the whole body of persons engaged in an occupation or calling," and in doing so consider "profession" a synonym for "occupation." Others differentiate professions from occupations by insisting that a profession requires specialized knowledge and long academic preparation which an occupation does not.

The earlest meaning of the term "professed," according to the Oxford Shorter Dictionary, was: "That has taken the vows of a religious order." The definition later was secularized to: "That profess to be duly qualified; professional." And the original meaning of the term "professional" was the act of professing, but it has come to mean: "The

occupation which one professes to be skilled in and to follow. . .A vocation in which professed knowledge of some branch of learning is used in its application to the affairs of others. . ."[8]

The essence of the professional idea and the professional claim, according to Hughes, is that professionals claim to know the nature of certain matters better than other people.[9]

Professional Criteria

Flexner distinguished professions from occupations by applying these six criteria:

1. A profession is intellectual, and carries with it great personal responsibility for the proper exercise of choice and judgment.

2. It is learned, for it is based on a substantial body of knowledge, developed over a long period of time and transmissible to students who wish to enter the profession.

3. A profession is practical, since its knowledge can be applied to real-life situations in the here and now.

4. It has techniques, or skills, which can be taught, and which serve as the mechanisms by which knowledge can be applied to the solution of problems.

5. It is organized into associations or groups of practitioners for various professional purposes, including those of guiding the education of students and regulating entrance to the profession.

6. It is guided by altruism, by concern for the patients or clients who come to it for help. Its purpose is to benefit mankind.[10]

These criteria were supported and amplified in 1933 by Carr-Saunders and Wilson who stipulated these characteristics for professions:

1. The activity consists of intellectual operations with large individual responsibility.

2. Raw materials of the work are drawn from science and learning.

3. The learning is practically applied.

4. The technique is communicable by education.

5. A tendency towards self-organization exists.

6. Practitioners are increasingly altruistic.[11]

To define profession is to invite controversy, according to Cogan, who agrees with Stephen's implication that reactions to a particular definition of profession are either "polarized toward an enthusiastic and uncritical acceptance or toward a rancorous and defensive rejection."[12]

Marshall discerns between professions and those vocations controlled by commercial contracts saying labor is standardized and professional service is not. A commercial contract spells out exact details and expectations of the labor worker's services, and failure of an individual worker to meet these expectations is quickly remedied without serious loss by dismissal. However, Marshall adds that it is "beyond the wit of man" to devise a contract that would specify, in terms of what could be enforced, what a client could expect to receive from a profession.[13] Marshall maintains the professional person offers more than skill:

> The professional man is distinguished by the further fact that he does not give only his skill. He gives himself. His whole personality enters into his work. It is hardly possible to be satisfied with a doctor or a lawyer unless one likes and respects him as a man. He is called upon to show judgment and understanding of human nature, as well as knowledge of medicine or law.[14]

Following the earlier work of Flexner, Carr-Saunders and Wilson, Liberman, in 1956, listed eight criteria necessary for an occupation to be a profession. These were:

1. A profession must perform unique and essential services.

2. It must emphasize intellectual techniques.

3. It must have a long period of specialized training to acquire a systematic body of knowledge based on research.

4. It must be given a broad range of autonomy.

5. Its practitioners must accept broad personal responsibility for judgments and actions.

6. It must place greater emphasis on service than on private economic gain.

7. It must develop a comprehensive self-governing organization.

8. It must have a code of ethics which has been clarified and interpreted by concrete cases. 15

McGlothlin adds another characteristic in differentiating professions from occupations saying a profession must deal with matters of great urgency and significance.[16] Greenwood says a profession must have these five characteristics: a systematic body of theory, professed authority, community sanction, regulative ethical codes and a professional culture.[17]

Traditional and Other Professions

These definitions, and others not mentioned, define the "traditional, true or learned professions." In earlier times these were law, religion and medicine, but the superciliousness of our modern social structure has made a "professional" out of anyone who does more or less reliably what he says he will do, and gets paid for it."[18]

Consequently there is no general agreement either on any authoritative statement as to which occupations are professions or on any list of requirements necessary for an occupation to be classified as a profession.

While they may never meet all the criteria of a "traditional profession" many occupations--some new, some old--endeavor to acquire some of these characteristics of professionalization in hopes that they will merit and be granted professional standing in the eyes of their clients and the public.[19] Many jobs are professions by Tawney's definition: "A profession may be defined most simply as a trade which is organized, incompletely, no doubt, but genuinely, for the performance of function."[20]

There are many ways in which vocations are conducted in attempting to gain recognition as professions rather than as "mere" occupations or

trades. Librarians strive to become experts on the effects of reading, on bibliography and reference, rather than only custodians and distributors of books; social workers attempt to show that the counseling they perform should not be done by amateurs; the nurse, whose occupation is old, seeks to upgrade her place in the medical system.[21]

Some occupations exaggerate their own importance presuming society will overlook such arrogance and think more highly of their services. Thus, garbage men become known as sanitation engineers, janitors are building service engineers, and so on. Job classifications such as these have other benefits since they better insure the "attractiveness" of the occupation to job seekers and help those already engaged in the occupation maintain a greater sense of self-esteem.

Sutherland says even common thieves can be considered professionals because they meet many requirements of traditional professions.[22] Personal service functionaries like barbers, bellboys, bootblacks, and taxi drivers also are easy to classify as professionals, according to Caplow.[23] This entire situation is carried to exorbitant extremes by Engberg, who says a person might qualify as a professional in terms of many definitions if he were to profess, by means of a newspaper advertisement, to walk your dog. This dog walker's entitlement to call himself a professional increases if he belongs to a group of dog-walkers who will assume responsibility collectively for seeing that the dog is tended to. Greater professionalization will be achieved if this group is part of a national organization which publishes a newsletter.[24]

Therefore, although only a few occupations meet all the requirements of the traditional professions, use of the term is widespread and there is no agreement as to exactly which bodies of persons practicing what vocations deserve to be given formal recognition as professions.

Even Carr-Saunders, while not openly criticizing his own 1933 criteria, later admitted that the concept of a profession is being transformed by the impact of metropolitan conditions. He says the process of professionalization in modern times is linked closely to the process of specialization of society, and that professional men are now regarded as experts having high competence in restricted spheres, with little or no prestige outside their particular roles.[25]

Arguments could be presented to support and to criticize the inclusion of certain occupations in the professional class, but, in reality, these would be theoretical actions contingent upon definition.

Is Journalism a Profession?

Where does journalism stand in this debate over professional recognition? Is there a place for it as a traditional profession? Is it a semi-profession? Is it a trade? One might argue that journalism can be intellectual, practical and skilled; but observers often criticize its lack of professional criteria.

Training. Is specialized intellectual training necessary for journalism? Flexner joins Carr-Saunders and Wilson in saying no! In 1930, Flexner criticized university journalism education by characterizing is as "on a par with university faculties of cookery and clothing," and condemned several university journalism programs.[26] Carr-Saunders and Wilson have said a journalist's job could be done without specialized intellectual training.[27]

Even in the United States, where university journalism programs have flourished, there still is nothing to prevent a person who has not been trained through these processes from becoming a successful journalist. The Alsops say reporting is a trade and not a profession because although one might gain valuable knowledge at journalism school, one still could be

a successful journalist without facing the degree of long and specialized training which is the mark of traditional professions such as medicine and law.[28] This argument thwarts any claim that specialized training is necessary for journalism.

Is Journalism Responsible? Since journalism is a practice which involves judgment it develops a sense of responsibility according to Carr-Saunders and Wilson, but they are quick to stress that this responsibility is "...out of proportion to the technique involved and in spite of the indirect relationship to clients."[29] Pulitzer says a journalist has responsibility in that he or she has the potential and the privilege of moulding the opinions of thousands daily.[30]

While it is generally agreed that journalists develop a sense of professional responsibility, there is concern whether this responsibility to journalists themselves and their audiences is paramount to the responsibility journalists have to their employers. The Hutchins Commission argues that the majority of journalists are employees and that their employers take the ultimate responsibility.[31] Rivers and Schramm consider one of the main problems in the professionalization of journalists to be that, since news people are employees, the final authority rests not with them but with their employers.[32] Gerald agrees.[33] Where freedom of the press exists, in other words, it is not necessarily a freedom of the working journalist, but rather a freedom controlled by editors and publishers.

Breed finds many differences between reporters and their publishers. Reporters, he says, have more liberal views than publishers but the latters' policies usually are followed.[34] According to Breed, publishers' policies sometimes contravene journalistic norms, and reporters often personally disagree with them.

Professional Organizations for Journalists. Reporters seeking to organize their practice to conform to professional standards have two specific choices---the social-fraternal associations, the trade unions, or both. Of the former, the Society of Professional Journalists (formerly known as Sigma Delta Chi), has become the dominant organization for American journalists seeking a professional society. Other societies serve particular segments of journalism such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the National Conference of Editorial Writers, the Radio Television News Directors Association, and the many regional or state broadcast societies. Journalism trade unions such as the American Newspaper Guild have considerable effect on improving salaries, working conditions and job tenure for newspaper reporters.

American journalists, therefore, have their associations and organizations, but there is no body--professional, social or union---which is solely an organization of rank-and-file, print and broadcast journalists.

The Hutchins Commission says this of the professional status of journalism:

> In the mass media, except for the higher levels of writing, the identity of the individual writer's product tends to be merged in a joint result, as in newspapers, where it is divided among reporter, copy desk, and makeup desk. The effective organization of writers on professional lines is therefore almost impossible.[35]

Professional Regulation. Any regulation which exists in American mass communication is carried out by non-journalists. The American Newspaper Publishers Association has concerned itself more with business problems of newspaper owners than with problems related to a free press in a free society. This concern is significant to the journalist's professional status because of recent arguments saying reporters should have "shield law" protection and not be forced to disclose information revealed in "professional confidence." Many journalists feel they should receive the same immunity between themselves and their news sources that doctors enjoy with patients, lawyers

have with clients and the clergy has with parishioners.[36]

Journalism faces strong regulation, even from governments in democratic countries. Rarely do journalists regulate themselves---as do the more traditional professions.

Professional Pride. Compared with some of the more traditional professions, journalism is of very low economic status. Leading journalists who have risen to the top through hard work and a little luck earn sizable incomes, but the status quo often receives little financial reward when compared to physicians and lawyers. Many news personnel indicate that their spouses work to supplement the family income, an infrequent necessity in most "professional" households.[37]

Perhaps this lower economic status is what causes high attrition among journalists. Hughes says the collective claims of a profession imply a "deep and lifelong commitment," and that one who leaves a profession is something of a renegade.[38] However, while former journalists can be found in many other occupations, the reverse is seldom true. For example, journalists have been known to enter law and education, but few lawyers or university professors become newspaper reporters or broadcast journalists.

Ethics for Whom? American journalists recently have considered themselves to be very concerned about ethics. Even the "free lunch" which journalists often enjoyed while they covered a noon hour press conference has been scorned by some reporters as being an unethical favor to accept. Journalists--some of them at least--say that if a company buys your lunch there will be an obligation to treat that company with a bias in the news.

But it appears that this concern for ethics is not with all journalists. In a 1973 study, for example, the Public Relations Society of America reported that 40 percent of the respondents in a survey of public relations counselors with major corporations reported they have been asked by journalists for special favors, such as product discounts, employment

for sons and daughters, free tickets for entertainment purposes, use of cars (asked of nonautomotive firms) for vacation, free repairs of products owned by journalists (including collision damage on autos), flat-rate fees for reworking news releases "to make them more acceptable," free rides on company planes toward vacation spots, product discounts, use of a company plane by a newsman's family for a vacation trip, and complimentary use of local and out-of-state hotel rooms.[39] Only 39 percent of the respondents said they felt free to deny such requests from the journalists prompting Frank W. Wylie, current President of PRSA and Director of Public Relations for the Chrysler Corporation to suggest that "the possibility (is) that the leverage is greater among the press, and that--in some cases at least--they may be the generators of loot, freebies, and junkets."

Summary and Conclusions

One might argue successfully both that journalism is a profession and that it is not. To say journalism is a profession in the traditional sense would be more idealistic than realistic. As a field, journalism has many elements and characteristics of professionalization, but lacks some important ingredients of the true professions.

Journalists sometimes are viewed as professionals because of recognition of the importance of their work; they are seen as people with much responsibility more than as inheritors of any tradition of meritorious performance.

While the practice of journalism may not meet all the criteria necessary for a profession, many individual journalists exhibit high degrees of professionalization in carrying out their duties. Perhaps then, because of its uniqueness, journalism should not be examined as a craft or a profession, but individual journalists should be typed as professionals or non-professionals. Society's opinion of the importance

of a person's work should, in other words, be formulated on the ethical and responsible manner in which this individual conducts his or her practice, and not on the tradition colleagues have acquired over a certain period of time.

Perhaps journalists are professionals and their employers are not, a phenomenon which Etizoni discusses but not in terms of journalism.[40] The author's personal experience as a working journalist has encountered employers with varying degrees of ethics which indirectly relate to professionalism in newsroom operations. One radio station manager subscribed to every available wire service and encouraged long-distance telephone calls to all parts of North America in search of the news; but a weekly newspaper publisher discouraged the use of photographs because they were too costly and encouraged editorial favors to businessmen and political candidates who advertised in the newspaper.

Perhaps, the question of whether or not journalism is a profession should be asked in terms of the individual and not the practice. If this is done one might find some more realistic examples of professional journalists, but it should be safe to say that these people might be the exception rather than the rule.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Stanley Walker, City Editor (New York: Stokes, 1934), p. 37.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ben H. Bagdikian, The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 270.

[4]Edwin Emery, The Press and America (3rd ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 416.

[5]Bagdikian, op. cit., p. 272.

[6]Oguz B. Nayman, "Professional Orientations of Journalists: An Introduction to Communicator Analysis Studies," Gazette (Vol. 19, 1973), pp. 195-212.

[7]Joseph Pulitzer, "The College of Journalism," North American Review (May, 1904), p. 649.

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[9]Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[10]Abraham Flexner, "Is Social Work a Profession?" School and Society, (June 26, 1915), p. 904.

[11]A.M. Carr-Saunders and P.A. Wilson, The Professions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), pp. 284-286.

[12]Morris L. Cogan, "The Problem of Defining a Profession," Annals of the American Academy of Political Science,(January, 1955), p. 105.

[13]T.H. Marshall, "Professionalism in Relation to Social Structure," Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, (August, 1939), p. 328.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Myron Liberman, Education as a Profession (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956), pp. 2-6.

[16]William J. McGlothlin, The Professional Schools (New York: Center for Applied Research in Education, Inc., 1964), p. 4.

[17]Ernest Greenwood, "The Elements of Professionalization," in Howard M. Vollmer and Donald L. Mills, eds., Professionalization (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 10.

[18]Edward Engberg, "Can the Professions Save Us?" The Center Magazine (November, 1968), pp. 5-8.

[19]Hughes, op. cit., p. 5.

[20]R.H. Tawney, The Acquisitive Society (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1920), p. 92.

[21]Hughes, op. cit., p. 5.

[22]Edwin Sutherland, "Professional Theft," in Vollmer and Mills, op. cit., pp. 29-33.

[23]T. Caplow, The Sociology of Work (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), pp. 48 and 139.

[24]Engberg, loc. cit.

[25]A.M. Carr-Saunders, "Professional Aspects," in Robert M. Fisher, ed., The Metropolis of Modern Life (New York: Doubleday, 1955), p. 286.

[26]Abraham Flexner, Universities: American, English, German (Oxford: University Press, 1930), pp. 160-161.

[27]Carr-Saunders and Wilson, The Professions, op. cit., p. 266.

[28]Penn Kimball, "Journalism: Art, Craft or Profession?" in Lynn, ed., op. cit., p. 246.

[29]Carr-Saunders and Wilson, The Professions, op. cit., p. 286.

[30]Pulitzer, op. cit., p. 650.

[31]William Ernest Hocking, Freedom of The Press: A Framework of Principle, A Report from the Commission on Freedom of the Press (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 169.

[32]William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, Responsibility in Mass Communication (Rev. ed., New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 241.

[33]J. Edward Gerald, The Social Responsibility of the Press (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 180.

[34]Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," in Seymour M. Lipset and Neil J. Smelser, eds., Sociology: The Progress of a Decade (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), pp. 580-591.

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[36]"Celebrity Prisoner," Time, January 22, 1973, pp. 66-67.

[37]David L. Grey and J. Edward Gerald, "How the Newsman Lives--A Self-Image Study," Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, Austin, Texas, 1964.

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